

Headache-reducing exercises

Helpful exercises for headache typically include both aerobic and stretching exercises.

Aerobic exercise

In general, low-impact physical activity and exercise should be maintained during uncomplicated pregnancies. Aerobic exercises are typically performed daily, beginning at a low level, then increasing as tolerated. Walking, swimming, and bicycling are all good aerobic exercises. A walking program often begins at about $\frac{1}{8}$ to $\frac{1}{4}$ mile per day, increased by $\frac{1}{8}$ to $\frac{1}{4}$ mile each week until achieving a target of 1–2 miles per day. You should always discuss plans for any exercise program with your obstetrician. In general, low-impact activities performed routinely before pregnancy can be continued.

Stretching exercises

Stretching exercises should be relaxing. They should be done daily, with each session lasting about 25 minutes. Stretches should result in a normal sensation of stretching, but not pain. Hold the stretch for 5 seconds, relax for 5–10 seconds, and then repeat each stretch about 3–5 times.

Several specific exercises are described below. You may perform several repetitions of each exercise during every exercise session, or vary stretches between exercise sessions.

- Neck range of motion: bend your chin to your chest, then rotate chin to each shoulder, then tip your ear toward your shoulder, then pull in your chin to make a double chin.
- Shoulder shrugs: sit/stand up straight and raise your shoulders straight up. Lower and relax. Then raise shoulders up and forward. Lower and relax. Then raise shoulders up and back.
- Suboccipital range of motion: place a rolled or folded towel behind your neck and gently pull down. Tilt your chin to your chest. Look up at the ceiling. Tilt your ear toward your shoulder.
- Neck stretches: tilt your ear to the shoulder on the same side. Then tilt your chin forward and toward the opposite breast. Gently press with your hand at the end of the stretch to feel the stretch.
- Neck isometrics: place your palm on your forehead and press your head against it, keeping your palm stationary. Don't let your head or hand move. Repeat with your hand on each side of your head.
- Head lift: place folded hands behind your neck at the base of your head. Pull elbows forward and up to achieve the sensation of lifting the head up slightly from the neck.
- Turtle: with head looking forward, push the chin forward, away from the neck. When the head is forward, turn about 1 inch to each side and up.

Schedule twice-daily stretching sessions, each lasting about 15 minutes. Stretching in the morning and before bed can help relieve stress before starting the day and aid with relaxation before sleep. Alternatively, you might include stretching exercises when watching your favorite daily television programs.

The stretching exercises that are particularly soothing for you can also be performed when you feel the beginning of a headache or muscle tension throughout the day. Many stretching exercises can be performed while standing or sitting and can act as stress-releasers when sitting in a long meeting or in the car, waiting in line at the store, or standing in the shower.

Acute headache relief techniques

Acute headache relief techniques can be used when a headache has already occurred, to help minimize pain. These may be used in conjunction with applying heat or ice (whichever you find more soothing) for 20 minutes to the neck and shoulders.

Three helpful techniques are described below:

- **Oscillatory movements:** small, rhythmic, side-to-side head movements, turning the head through about 25% of its full range of motion. Starting with your head facing forward, first turn your head away from the painful side and back. Repeat at a rate of about 1 per second, for a total of 30 seconds. Rest for 30 seconds; then repeat until no further relief is noted. Then switch to turning the head toward the painful side, and proceed as above.
- **Positional distraction:** Place books on the floor in a stack that is about 1–2 inches high. Lie down on the floor, with the back of your head resting on the books. The edge of the books should be near the middle of your head, so that your neck is free. Relax so that your head moves up from your neck.
- **Trigger-point compression:** during a headache, you may notice certain spots on your muscles that aggravate the head pain when you press them. These are called trigger points. If you identify trigger points, apply pressure to them with your fingers and hold for 12–60 seconds. Release the pressure, and proceed with your usual stretching exercises.